DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 158 750 IR 006 347

AUTHOR Swinney, H. J.
TITLE Characteristics of History Museum Activity and Their Influence on Potential Electronic Cataloging. Research Report 8.
PUB DATE Mar 76
NOTE 10p.; Prepared by the now defunct Museum Data Bank Committee

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Activities; Classification; Comparative Analysis; *Design Needs; *Electronic Data Processing; Facility Inventory; *History; *Museums; Problems; Statistical Data

ABSTRACT

The broad patterns exhibited by history museums and their collections--the politico-geographical base, the size and collections, unsystematic acquisition, wide range of object types, and lack of categorization, and the lack of scholarly discipline to help development--differ from those of art and science museums, making their electronic data processing needs different. The application of these techniques in history museums should be geared toward inventory control rather than loan exhibitions (which rarely occur) or the capacity for research oriented comparison and counting of data (which is what these systems are geared toward in other museums). There is a need for these systems in history museums now, and there will be a greater need in the immediate future; however, the solutions and pilot projects in other types of museums, while instructive, are not entirely applicable to the history museum. (MBR)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

- ED158750

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

MUSEUM DATA BANK RESEARCH REPORT

Number 8

Characteristics of History Museum Activity and their influence On Potential Electronic Cataloging

---

by
H. J. Swinney

March 1976

This report, or any portion thereof, may be reproduced for any non-commercial purpose provided appropriate credit is given to the author and the Museum Data Bank Committee as publisher.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

R. G. Chenhall

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

Museum Data Bank Committee
Robert G. Chenhall, Chairman

Margaret Woodbury Strong Museum
700 Allen Creek Road
Rochester, N.Y.

IR006347

In the past five years or so, history museums have gradually become aware that their colleagues in the disciplines of art and science are ahead of them in applying the immense capabilities of electronic data processing to the catalogs of their holdings. Most curators of history are not very well equipped--or at least do not consider themselves well equipped--to grasp and master the intricacies of the data processing field, which is really a science in itself, and so they have very naturally turned for help either to computer manufacturers and service bureaus or to museum colleagues who have made successful beginnings in computerizing catalogs. These latter advisers have tended to be staff members of science or university museums, or of art museums, and have naturally and properly based their advice on programs in their own fields. Yet there are differences between the natures of collections, and therefore of catalogs, in the three kinds of institutions.

These differences probably cannot be reduced to quantifiable form. What follows are the reflections one history museum director, supported by verbal expressions of opinion elicited in telephone conversations with a number of long-experienced history museum curators, some of whom are now themselves directors. The names of these colleagues appear in an appendix to this paper, but I here record my dependence on their experience and their assessment of the future.

Generally speaking, history museums and their collections tend to show certain number of broad patterns, even though the incidence of these patterns is not perfectly even across the field, of course.

1. Politico-geographical Base. A few major history museums, mostly in the East and Northeast, take some general range of subject matter as their field, but the vast majority of history museums are devoted to the history of a specific place. The archetypes are the museums of the powerful tax-supported state historical agencies, ranging from the Maine State Museum to the Oregon Historical Society. In addition, literally thousands of county and local historical agencies, large and small, operate museums. Practically all of these define their interest in terms of a geographical or political unit of some sort, and therefore collect only what they consider significant for their own area, refusing comparable material which is associated with some other place. In this, such museums differ--more or less, as the case may be--from art and science museums.

2. Size of Collections. Except for a small number of very large and, usually, long-established institutions, art museums typically have modest numbers of objects in their collections: David Vance has said that the Museum of Modern Art, when its collection records were converted to computerized form, possessed only about 26,000 objects in all. The Memorial Art Gallery of Rochester, big enough to have a budget of about $750,000, has only about 4,000 objects. Very few history museums have anything like an accurate count of their objects (and some counts that do exist may be unwittingly inflated) but the average history collection is much larger. The Idaho Historical Society estimates that it owns nearly 200,000 objects, the Strong Museum counts more than 300,000, and the history section of Oakland Museum also believes that it owns 300,000 things. Both Idaho and Oakland report that they average more than 100 accessions monthly. Since a single accession often includes a number of objects, their total collections are probably growing at the rate of 1,500 to 2,000 items per year at the very least, with resulting clerical problems for registrars.

History museum objects are typically relatively small both in size and in value, and in most history museums a great deal of material is received by donation. Even when material is purchased, a purchase budget goes a good deal farther in history than it does in the current world of art. It is probably all of these factors combined that have led to the very large numbers of objects in history museum collections. Natural history museums with systematic collections commonly have even larger holdings to cope with, but the quality of system alters the case.

3. Unsystematic Acquisition. History collections differ in a fundamental way from natural history collections: they are collected in an unsystematic way. Although a few history museums have been able to predict and acquire just what they want (perhaps this is true mostly of historic houses furnished to a specific target date) the majority are rarely or never able to anticipate what will become available to them and when. The curator of a history museum sits, as it were, on a bank of a stream, down which material floats past him in a random assortment. As each object passes, he must decide instantly whether it has either current or potential value for his institution. If he thinks it does, he scoops it out of the passing miscellany to be saved; if his decision is against it, it floats out of reach, never to return. His difficulty is that he cannot see up the stream--that is, into the future--in order to see what is coming next and whether or not it duplicates something he has already chosen, nor can he, usually, have a second thought and retrieve an object that he has once refused.

The vast variety of nature and the vagaries of donors and investments impose some of these limitations on natural history and art museums too. Yet natural historians necessarily base their disciplines on the systems which they identify in nature, and within certain limits they have therefore typically sought to create systematic collections within their institutions. Since art museums far more commonly purchase their objects than do history museums, they too have been able to guide and predict the assembly of their collections in some measure. But the history museum, having decided to concentrate its current collecting on (say) agricultural implements, is commonly faced with the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity offered by the death of some grande dame of the community, whose Victorian mansion has not been cleaned out for a century--and whose heir is willing to give the local museum first call on everything. The haphazard arrival of unexpected troves of this kind defies system.

4. The Wide Range of Kinds. The range of history museum objects is immense, too. It may, of course, include works of art of any kind as well as materials of natural history, but in addition, history museum collections must cope with the whole range of human productivity within their chosen parameters of time and place. They include so many sorts of objects that even the Library of Congress classification system is hard to use. Not only is man the tool-making animal, but he uses those tools to produce the bewildering variety of things that wind up in history museums, including things whose purpose has been forgotten as well as the constantly-appearing objects whose very existence was not predicted in previous years. It would be pointless to argue that this is more confusing than the numberless specimens that emerge from nature or from the intellectual complexity that surrounds works of art--but the problems involved in dealing with this broad range are nevertheless puzzling ones for the history museum.

5. No Systems of Categorization. There is no widely-accepted matrix within which to fit data concerning history objects. Works of art quite typically come to a museum equipped with a title and the name of their creator, both of which are alphabetizable within some language, and thus manageable within the matrix so provided. This pre-existing system, imperfect though it is, forms a fairly successful basis for the cataloging of art objects. For about 250 years, natural scientists have had the Linnaean system and its derivatives to provide the basis upon which they create their systematic collections. Despite a certain amount of debate about the proper identification and classification of any given specimen, the availability of this Linnanean matrix is of the greatest importance for a natural history museum in the management of data concerning its specimens. It is already something of an encodement, in which the title assigned to a specimen conveys a good deal of information concerning it and its place in the scheme of things. Any such systematic matrix for history museum objects is so far mostly lacking. In a few cases--for example, collectible decorative arts and firearms--a terminology originated and defined by collectors has become more or less uniform, but for the vast range of objects of daily life, terminological confusion largely reigns. Thus no two curators are likely to classify their material in the same way, with resultant problems in the retrieval, interchange, and comparison of data.

6. The Lack of a Scholarly Discipline. Finally, history museum collections differ from art and natural history collections in a subjective way which is delicate to discuss and unfortunate in its results: such objects are not the subject of any standard scholarly discipline. That is, there is no scholarly discipline that derives its fundamental information from these objects, and is thus dedicated to them. Art history is the basis of most of the scholarship in art museums, and inevitably it begins with the work of art, which is almost always an object. Of course, the art historian must also be a social historian, a culture historian, and perhaps a political and economic historian too--but his special business as a historian nevertheless derives from the object in his custody. In the various fields of natural history, the object is again the basis from which study proceeds. Despite the sophisticated scientific--even statistical and mathematical--techniques which the modern science curator brings to his work, the object orientation of the discipline is so clear that the mammalogist or botanist without specimens is unthinkable. But not so in a history museum: the professional historian has been trained from the beginning to regard the written word, not the object, as his source. Indeed, history can be defined as the written record of man's experience, and it is thus that we distinguish history from prehistory, which is the study of man's experience before there were written records. (It is worth nothing parenthetically that prehistory is the province of the anthropologist and the archaeologist, both of whom usually work out of museums of science or natural history rather than museums of history.) The North European style enthnographer with his strong interest in the material culture of his own society is practically unknown in the United States, and few if any American graduate schools of anthropology teach courses in material culture, much less the material culture of white men. The late Professor William B. Hesseltine of the University of Wisconsin even argued cogently (though in my view incorrectly) in 1957 that artifacts give "...no answers to the historian's queries."

Thus the study of the physical objects associated with the historic period in the United States has been left, by default so to speak, to a few scholars from other fields and to collectors and others who are rather unkindly lumped under the heading of amateurs. Only in relatively recent years have occasional academically trained historians (mostly in the field of decorative arts) interested themselves seriously in a rather narrow range of history museum objects, and only recently have a few schools of museum techniques begun to turn out young, and as yet mostly inexperienced, curators with special training in studying historical objects. Up until now, the identification, classification, and study of the objects of white history in America has proceeded at a methodological, if not an intellectual, level considerably less professional from a scholarly standpoint than that which has obtained in museums of art and natural history--unpopular though it may be to admit it out loud.

What do these various factors suggest for the application of electronic data banking techniques to the world of history museums?

In the first place, they suggest that the activities and collections of history museums, and therefore the requirements which history museums impose upon their catalogs, are significantly different from the activities and requirements of art and natural history museums. In my telephone survey, I asked a number of experienced history museum curators what kinds of questions their institutions ordinarily address (figuratively speaking, of course) to their catalog files. Since the inquiry was made conversationally to old friends, the answers came back in different forms and words--but the import was remarkably unanimous.

With no exceptions, these institutions are interested primarily in what other kinds of museums refer to as "inventory control"--even though none of them was familiar with the phrase. In managing their huge and largely unsystematized holdings, they want to know what objects they have, they want to keep track of the data concerning those objects, and they want to know if possible where those objects are. They would like, in brief, to be able to go from the data to the object and from the object to the data. Several of them volunteered that the most common single question which makes them turn to their catalog is that posed by an individual who once donated an object and is now inquiring about its dispositon. Particularly in the somewhat smaller, somewhat more personal communities, the museum's inability to locate an object given by a politically or socially powerful figure can result in a public relations disaster out of all proportion to the true importance of the question. This is one of the mundane practicalities of history museum work. (The descendant of a bug presumably never demands to know where his ancestor is displayed!)

Some curators agree that they use catalogs in assembling materials for exhibiton, and one says that because like objects are not and cannot be stored together in his museum, he is forced to begin <u>via</u> the catalog cards. He would prefer to begin with the specimens, and <u>all</u> feel that the catalog is largely a system of reference to the actual specimens. Many or most seem to

do most of their work from their knowledge of the specimens directly rather than from the catalog data.

Partly because of their politically-defined boundaries, the majority of these history museums do not borrow very extensively for exhibiton. When they do, their borrowing seems to be mostly from local or regional private collectors, rather than from other museums. In any event, many of them only rarely stage loan exhibitions; one, who has served two major museums in recent years, reported that the first had staged several major loan exhibitons before 1966, but that a reorientation of its galleries in that year had made loans unusual since that time, and that the second sometimes borrows from local collectors, but mounts most of its exhibitions from its own resources. Fundamentally the same answer came from most of the museums.

Thus, unlike the art museums which borrow so constantly for their continually-changing exhibitons, history museums seem to have relatively little intrinsic interest in the networking capability of the computer. The Director of Museums of one western state historical agency said that he would like to be able to query a central bank about the location of, say, all the fine quilts in his state--but when the question was pursued, he said he thought it was unlikely that his institution could justify more than $1,000 to $2,000 a year at the very most for the cost of such a capability. Since he commands a budget of upwards of $500,000 annually for museum purposes alone, it would seem that his expression was of curiosity rather than of concrete interest in the potential of networking. In another state, the museum director pointed out that his nearest professional neighbors are several hundred miles away, so that problems of expense preclude borrowing from them. Another reported that he would like to be able to inquire occasionally, but mounted only about one loan show a year.

The computer's capacity for the research-oriented comparison and counting of data items does not attract the history museum, either. Plenty of straightforward document-based historical research <u>about</u> objects goes on in history museums, but research based <u>on</u> objects, in the sense in which that is understood by academically-trained curators in art and science museums, is not a very significant feature of the current history museum scene. This is presumably or possibly because of the dissociation of history museums from any formal academic discipline. The curators of one or two northeastern museums of the decorative arts report a strong interest in object-based research, largely from within their own staff, and indeed in one of these institutions the format of the catalog has been heavily directed to that end. But all the other curators report that while they would personally like to be more deeply involved in the formal study of their things, they and their staffs have little opportunity for research. Furthermore, only a small number of serious outside inquiries reach them, and most or all of these are not of a sort that could be answered by reference to the statistical and comparative powers of an electronic data bank.

Practically all curators report that it is the inventory-control capability of their catalog that they use in responding to the research questions they do get, because it is necessary in practically every case to refer directly

to the object rather than to a catalog description of the object. The ex-curator of the Corning Glass Museum, currently engaged in a study of American pattern flasks, reported that it was not practical to make comparisons from the catalog descriptions of the flasks in the Corning collection, despite the fact that he himself had written a number of those descriptions. The characteristics to be compared are so subtle and subjective that the specimens must be put side by side. Even if the cost of entry of very large amounts of information into a data bank could be borne, the lack of a generally-accepted terminology (and the relative rarity of research efforts in this field, too) would probably make the availability of the data of so little general use that the cost could not be justified.

The demand for inventory control, the large number of accessions experienced, the unpredictable pattern and timing of collection activity, and the numerically large collections all combine to make it imperative that the catalog be available during all business hours at least. It may be true that the number of routine inquiries made of a history collection catalog is a function of the total volume in numbers of the collection itself; but whatever the reason, curators in history museums want (and seem legitimately to need) constant access to their catalogs. Although an accurate comparison of this factor with the patterns of art and natural history museum activities would probably be more work than it was worth, one curator summed it up, unconsciously, for all the rest. Speaking of the way in which scientists lay out a research problem in advance and then use only an hour or two of pre-appointed computer time (or sometimes only a few minutes) to ask all the questions necessary, he said "That would be like having my office open only once a week."

None of this is intended to argue that electronic data banking does not have current applications of importance, and future applications of far greater importance, to the history museum. Indeed, I feel so strongly about the feasibility and necessity of electronic data banking service for history museums that I have led my own museum to very substantial commitments, both in human and fiscal resources, to the solution of this very problem. But I do argue that the needs of history museums, now and in the immediate future although not perhaps for all time, are dissimilar to the needs of art and natural history museums, and that the solutions that have been so successfully obtained from pilot and even operating programs in such museums are instructive for history museums but are not entirely applicable to history catalogs. The history museum does not now need the computer's ability to massage and statistically compare data--that is, to derive new information from the facts it already holds--nor does it now need the computer's potential to centralize and redistribute data about the holdings of a large number of institutions. Typically, history museums want to grapple with the overpowering problems of the control of their huge inventories and the relation of the uncodified data to the heterogeneously-assorted objects. They also need to be able to ask simple questions of their catalogs continually at random times. They want to solve their current problems, and there is universal agreement that manual card catalogs are everywhere breaking down or have broken down in the face of the museum's demands. As clerical costs rise and the corresponding

costs of electronic data banking fall, it seems self-evident that some form of machine management of data is going to be the answer.

At present, the history museum's requirement of constant accessibility to data means that very large amounts of data storage would have to be "up" on an electronic machine all the time during business hours, with resulting costs which probably make that solution impractical today. The immediate answer may lie in the use of the machine as an indexing and sorting device for data which is stored either in hard copy form or in some form of micro-photography. The preliminary requirement to such a solution is almost certainly the creation of an intellectual matrix into which to fit the data for sorting and retrieval--that is, an internally consistent and rigidly hierarchical system of classification for history museum objects. This is something that is much easier to suggest than to do. Nevertheless, it is essential for history museums to bring their own data into rational form before they subject their catalogs to the rigorous logic of the machine. In the meantime, they need to plan very carefully for the possibility that some day lowered relative costs and perhaps improved technological capacities will make the full capabilities of the computer more attractive to history museums. Inter-institutional standardization of data-managing machinery and programs (in the computer sense) has been demonstrated to be unnecessary, but inter-institutional standardization of the ways in which data are created and recorded may turn out to be the future basis for institutional compatibility and the free interchange of information. The need to solve current problems must not undermine the next steps of improvement.

But all that is in the future. Whatever solutions eventually emerge, it now seems to be definite in the minds of a number of history museum curators, whose experience probably aggregates several hundred years and whose current responsibilities are a guarantee of their competence, that the patterns of demand on history museum catalogs vary significantly from the corresponding patterns in art and natural history museums, and that the solutions to the problem posed by economical and efficient data processing must therefore be correspondingly differnt.

APPENDIX

Individuals consulted by telephone in the preparation of this paper:

Frye, Thomas	Curator of History, Oakland (Calif.) Public Museum
Hart, Arthur	Museum Director, The Idaho State Historical Society
Schaeffer, Margaret W.	Director, The Jefferson County (N.Y.) Historical Society (previously Curator, The Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer)
Thomas, M. W.	Director, The New York State Historical Association (previously Chief Curator, The Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village)
Wall, Alexander, Jr.	President, Old Sturbridge Village (previously Director, The New Jersey Historical Society).
Watson, John	Principal Curator, The Office of (New York) State History (previously Curator/Registrar, The Hagley Museum)
Wilson, Kenneth	Director of Collections, The Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village (previously Curator, The Corning Museum of Glass)

Erratum: The name of Stanley Sohl, Director of Museums, the Kansas State Historical Society, was accidentally omitted from the list on this page.